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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BAKU 000451

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SUBJECT: AZERBAIJAN'S SOUTHERN BORDER REGIONS AND IRAN

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Classified By: Ambassador Anne E. Derse for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: An April 10-12 trip to Azerbaijan's southern Astara, Lerik, Yardimli, and Lenkoran regions by Embassy Iran Watcher revealed a normal situation along the border, with no evidence of increased border traffic or a military buildup as reported by the Baku press (reftel). Embassy contacts in the south believed that Russia, rather than Iran, is responsible for these false media reports. Embassy contacts also attribute reports of ethnic Talysh separatist movements to "outside influences," reporting that Talysh grievances were similar to those of ordinary Azerbaijanis, and were rooted in Azerbaijan's limited economic opportunities. Local contacts also reported that Iran exerts considerable influence in Azerbaijan's southern regions, through charitable organizations, religious training, and Azerbaijani-language television broadcasts. An Azerbaijani NGO activist who travels regularly to Iran said that many of her Iranian NGO contacts were increasingly unhappy with Iranian President Ahmadinejad's handling of foreign policy and economic matters. End Summary.

Azerbaijan's Southern Border With Iran

¶2. (C) As tensions between the international community and Iran have increased, so too has the volume of highly speculative reports associated with these developments in the Azerbaijani press. With headlines ranging from "Iranians Fleeing Iran to Azerbaijan" to "Separatist Talysh Leaders Arrested," these and other similar reports have served to significantly raise public concerns about a possible military confrontation with Iran. During an April 10-12 visit to Azerbaijan's southern Astara, Lerik, Yardimli, and Lenkoran regions, Embassy Iran Watcher met with a number of local opposition politicians, Talysh ethnic leaders, and civil society leaders to discuss these and other issues.

¶3. (C) According to local opposition politicians and Talysh ethnic leaders in Astara (which serves as Azerbaijan's principal border crossing with Iran), border traffic between Azerbaijan and Iran is "normal," with none of our contacts having noted an appreciable increase in traffic from Iran in recent months. Contrary to Baku-based press reports of an April 3 border closure (reftel), none of the leaders interviewed was aware of any recent border closures and attributed any slowdowns to Novruz holiday travel. (Note - Iran Watcher observed only limited Iranian privately owned vehicle traffic across the border; northbound Iranian buses

appeared to have been largely empty. End note.) With regard to press reports claiming that Iranians were acquiring considerable amounts of real estate in Azerbaijan in order to escape a military attack, one politician said that Iranians with means already owned homes in Baku, having acquired them years before current tensions. Asked to comment on the source of speculative press reporting, all pointed to Russia - not Iran - as the likely instigator. According to one local politician: "We know Iran and how to deal with them. It is Russia who is unpredictable and behind many problems - look at Georgia." (Note - Foreign Minister Mammadyarov told the Ambassador that "those interested in stirring up problems" had taken a 2 hour border closure due to computer difficulties and spun up these stories. He also told the Ambassador that he had asked the Ministry of National Security to look into who was behind these reports. End note.)

14. (C) Concerning reports of ethnic Talysh separatism, local politicians dismissed these reports as the work of "outside influences." While none denied that many in the Talysh community were unhappy, all firmly believed that Talysh grievances were no different than those of ordinary Azerbaijanis - primarily associated with pervasive corruption and the lack of economic opportunity. (Note - According to the OSCE, Azerbaijan's Talysh minority is one of its largest, numbering approximately 500,000. The Talysh are Shi'a Muslims who speak Talysh, a Persian dialect. The Talysh community spans into northwestern Iran, where an estimated 100,000 live. End note.) Because of this, one opposition politician reported, locals were made reliant on small-scale trade with neighboring Iran. According to this same politician, "at least 600 men" in Astara reportedly made a living bringing goods from Iran to market in Azerbaijan. As for the rest, "all (are) in Russia."

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Iranian Influence from a Civil Society Perspective

15. (C) According to civil society and NGO leaders in the city of Lenkoran, Iranian influence in the region was "considerable." One NGO leader, a Persian instructor at a local high school who regularly travels to Iran to work with Iranian women's NGOs, said that the Imam Khomeini Foundation is quite active in the region, providing direct financial and material assistance to families in need. (She was unaware of any Iranian Embassy or Cultural Center activities in the region.) She also explained that Iranian religious influence in the region was quite strong, with many local Imams having received their theological training in Qom. Asked to which Grand Ayatollah most locals owed their loyalty to, she reported the Grand Ayatollahs Lenkerani and Tabrizi had the greatest following. (Note - While the influence of Grand Ayatollahs Lenkerani and Tabrizi is strongest in rural areas, public opinion polling and Embassy contacts indicate that most urban Azerbaijanis, especially in Baku, owe their allegiance to Grand Ayatollah Al-Sistani. End note.)

16. (C) Embassy contacts in the southern regions report that Iranian Seher Television was widely watched. Attributing locals' interest in watching Seher Television primarily to a desire to get information from sources outside of Azerbaijani state-controlled media, one leader claimed that the number of telephone calls from Azerbaijanis to live call-in Seher programming "was going up." While our contacts believed that most locals maintained a healthy level of suspicion vis-a-vis Iranian outreach efforts due to Iran's treatment of its own Azeri minority and continued cooperation with Armenia, they also feared that Iran could eventually exploit Azerbaijan's economic difficulties to its own advantage.

17. (C) With regard to the Talysh minority in Azerbaijan, while our contacts acknowledged that the Talysh community contained separatist elements, they were unaware of any

larger-scale, popular separatist undercurrents. Pointing to the numerous freedoms that the Talysh of Azerbaijan enjoy that ethnic Azeris in Iran do not (to include the formation of their own NGOs and use of their mother tongue), Azerbaijani politicians and NGO activists believed that most Talysh grievances were similar to their own: official corruption and deteriorating economic conditions. Concerning possible Iranian attempts to manipulate the region's Talysh, all were far more concerned about Russian attempts, pointing to the large number of locally available Talysh newspapers from Russia and alleged financial assistance from Russia. It was also alleged that Iran provided more limited financial assistance and moral support (in the form of Seher Television programming) to the Talysh.

A View from Iran

18. (C) The Lenkoran NGO leader who travels to Iran frequently reported that during her most recent visit to northwestern Iran in the spring, many Iranians privately told her "don't let Islam in," a warning she interpreted not to allow a "mullah government" to become established in Azerbaijan. She said that despite increasing tensions with the US, she neither felt nor saw any hostility toward the US. She also reported that the majority of her local NGO contacts were increasingly unhappy with the Ahmadinejad regime's handling of foreign policy and economic matters.

COMMENT

19. (C) In spite of the flurry of alarmist press stories in Baku, life in Azerbaijan's southern regions bordering Iran appears untouched by any fear of an impending military conflict. Reports of backlogs at the border or huge numbers of Iranians fleeing to Azerbaijan appear to be false. Tightly interwoven both ethnically and commercially, residents of Azerbaijan's southern border regions report that they understand their southern neighbor far better than they do Russia, to whom they attribute press and other efforts to destabilize Azerbaijan. However, through both broadcasting and charitable activities, Iran clearly has a profound influence on daily life in Azerbaijan's southern regions. We will continue to explore this and other influences.

DERSE